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Letter dated 31 August 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to reproduce below, for your information and for circulation as a document of the General Assembly, under item 54 of the provisional agenda of the fifty-sixth session, and of the Security Council, the comments of the spokesman of the Foreign Office of Pakistan in response to a question on the misgivings arising from a reported statement of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on Pakistan's compliance with the agreement on the screening of Afghan refugees and also about Pakistan's role in the efforts for the release of aid workers detained by the Taliban authorities.

"As for the first part of your question, Pakistan is not throwing out any Afghan refugees who are in the Jallozai or Shamshattoo camps, where a joint screening by a UNHCR team and officials of the Pakistan Refugee Commission is taking place. However, Pakistan is not in a position to absorb any further flows of Afghan refugees, who are mostly economic migrants. We have repeatedly requested the United Nations and also other international organizations to provide relief to displaced Afghans inside Afghanistan. Relief should be provided to areas controlled by the Northern Alliance and areas controlled by the Taliban Government so that these displaced Afghans do not have to leave Afghanistan in search of food and other relief assistance.

"As your know, Pakistan has been host to the largest refugee population in the world for more than two decades now. At present, the Afghan refugees number close to 2.5 million. Since last September, Pakistan has received close to 200,000 Afghan refugees, mostly because of the drought conditions and extreme economic hardships in that country. We are not in a position to receive and take care of further influx of Afghan refugees.

* A/56/150.

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"This position should be understood by the international community, in particular against the backdrop of the news flashed on television screens of late, when a country the size of a continent finds it within its rights to turn back a ship carrying about 400 Afghan asylum-seekers from its territorial waters. It was also very aptly put by the UNHCR High Commissioner himself, Mr. Ruud Lubbers, in an article in a British paper last June, where he queried how he could ask the Pakistani officials to accept more refugees when in some of the 'industrialized and far richer countries asylum-seekers are treated like a modern day version of the plague-rat'. So I think Pakistan's position that it is no longer able to absorb further flows of refugees should be well understood.

"Regarding the second part of your question on Pakistan's role with regard to the ongoing efforts for the release of the international aid workers detained in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been doing whatever it can and it will continue to do whatever it can, so that this problem is amicably resolved."

(*Signed*) Shamshad **Ahmad**